Remarks of James Russell Wiggins
at the Commencement Exercises at
University of Maine at Orono
May 15, 1982

When I last spoke from this platform to the graduating class of the University of Maine, on June 1, 1967, most of you in this graduating class were in kindergarten. You have made a lot of progress since; the rest of us have not done as well. You have completed some 15 years of consistent application to a great purpose. In the years ahead, few of you are likely to work as consistently, persistently, and as long at a single task. So this is for you, and for all of us a day of celebration. We meet to rejoice in your progress. We have come here to congratulate you. It is not what you have so successfully done; but what you will do that gives this occasion the title of a commencement. So while we look back on what you have done with praise, we also look forward to what you will do with confidence.

What you will do and can do may be much influenced by the world in which you are going to work. And only a veritable pollyanna would dare tell you, "all's well with the world". But it may help you a bit to recall that this isn't the first time a generation has faced an uncertain world.

The gloomiest contemporary today could hardly exceed the

pessimism of Tacitus who wrote of the reign of Galba: "We now enter the history of a period, rich in disaster, gloomy with wars, rent by sedition, and savage in its very hours of peace. Slaves betray their masters, freed men their patrons, and he who has no enemy is destroyed by his friends".

The Nuremberg Chronicle, that Fifteenth Century summary of things past and things to come, professed to contain: "events most worthy of notice from the beginning of the world to the calamity of our time", and it divided all history into six ages. When it came out on July 12, 1493, it left only six unfilled pages on which to record events from the date of printing to the Day of Judgment.

There is an astonishing, almost a depressing contemporary note in the gloomy Eighteenth Century statements of Reverend Samuel Williams, of Salem, Massachusetts, who wrote in his Discourse on the Love of Our Country in 1775: "Throughout the whole continent of Asia people are reduced to such a degree of abusement and degradation that the very idea of liberty is unknown to them. In Africa, scarce any human beings are to be found but barbarians, tyrants, and slaves: all equally remote from the true dignity of human nature and from a well regulated state of society. Nor is Europe free from the curse. Most of her nations are forced to drink deep of the bitter cup. And in those in which freedom seems to have been established, the vital flame is going out. Two kingdoms, those of Sweden and Poland, have been betrayed and enslaved in the course of one year. The free towns of Germany

can remain free no longer than their potent neighbors shall please to let them. Holland has got the forms if she has lost the spirit of a free country. Switzerland alone is in the full and safe possession of her freedom."

The world into which you take your training and your talent is indeed, like the world in many ages before it, a world of difficulty, danger and uncertainty. None of its difficulties, however, is pre-ordained. There are no iron laws of historical inevitability that destine the world to some predetermined catastrophe. The kind of a world that it will be 15 or 20 years or 50 years from now is the kind of a world your generation will make it. Yours is the best educated, the most educated, and the most expensively educated generation in American history. To vindicate and justify that expense in time and money and resource must be one of your major purposes in life. Some enormous challenges confront you. Let us just content ourselves now with viewing only two of them:

First, you are going to have to remedy a defect, remove a weakness, and alter a tendency that threatens the survival of democratic governments here and around the world. That weakness is the disability, disinclination, or inability of elected democracies to resist the importunities of fractions of society or fragments of the electorates for grants and subsidies beyond the capacity of the country's collective resources.

The pressures generated by all the petitioners for largesse have driven most of the democracies into wild inflationary

disaster — some of them more than 100 percent a year. In our own case, benefits paid to individuals have soared until they constitute half of all federal spending. Since 1970, social security payments alone have increased from 26.3 billion dollars to 119.4 billion dollars, medicare costs have gone up from 6.7 billion dollars to 38.7 billion dollars, civil service pensions from 2.7 billion to 17.3 billion, unemployment compensation from 3 billion to 24.3 billion, medicaid from 2.7 billion to 16.4 billion, food stamps from 1 billion to 13.4 billion. Many like to blame defense spending for the trillion dollar debt and the 150 billion dollar deficit, but the defense share of expenditures in 1980 was the smallest since 1939. Defense share of the gross national product was under 5 percent.

Non-defense items, on the other hand, went up from 10 percent of the gross national product in the sixties to 18 percent in the eighties. Nor is it just or fair to wholly blame welfare and poverty programs for the whole rise. The bulk of the expansion of non-defense spending is in payments that do not depend on proven poverty, or a means test. The Old Age and Survivors System is illustrative of the problem. This society can finance a system to ameliorate the hardships of indigent or disabled old age; but it is doubtful that it can or should subsidize the premature retirement of the able and competent middle aged, and distribute to the well-to-do and the very rich gratuities provided by taxes on the working young and middle aged. But any proposal to diminish these gratuities brings choruses of objection. Peter Petersen, former Secretary of Commerce, recently estimated that only 8.5 percent of total federal spending payments to

individuals is based on financial need.

President John F. Kennedy was aware of this threat to national well being and understood the psychology behind unlimited demands for subsidies. I can hear him now, as he stood on that freezing inaugural day on the steps at the East Front of the Capitol, pleading for an unselfish citizenship. "Ask not what your country can do for you," he said; "ask what you can do for your country". Few of us seemed to hear him. We have rejected his appeal. We have switched from Camelot to Oliver Twist. Our slogan is: "Please Sir, may I have some more". But we are going to have to return to Kennedy in the future. We cannot permanently support a trillion dollar debt that is costing us annually 100 billion in interest. We are going to have to check the elected officials, the senators and congressmen who buy our votes by promising more payments for everything. This is, in my opinion, our chief domestic problem.

It is hardly necessary to say what our chief foreign problem is. It is on the mind of every thinking person. It is the threat of nuclear destruction. People like Jonathan Shell suggest that it is not just the destruction of our own country, or our way of life, or of western civilization that is involved, but it could be the destruction of life on this planet. Agreed as we are on the specter that hangs over us all; we are not yet agreed on how to deal with it. Since 1947, this country has made one proposal after another. The United States, in 1947, gained the support of all but two countries in the United Nations Disarmament Committee,

for a plan to set up a UN Atomic Commission to govern the production and deployment of nuclear energy and arms, to inspect the whole process in every land, and to punish (without veto) those defying controls. This country would have surrendered its atomic weapons on the creation of this agency. The Soviet Union and Poland voted against it in committee and the Soviet Union vetoed it in the UN. Similar proposals have since been rejected. There have been some gains. The testing of nuclear weapons in the air finally was banned by agreement; but neither great power has a clear record on banning underground testing.

Hopes for some progress with the Soviet Union are rising again. Sooner or later, somehow or other the manufacture, possession, deployment and use of nuclear weapons simply must be prevented. We must keep united in that purpose.

It will be unfortunate if, in the pursuit of it, we become divided over means, or mislead by over-simplified solutions like the Will Rogers solution for submarine warfare in World War I. (Some of you will remember that he proposed that we heat the Atlantic Ocean to 250 degrees and broil the German submarine crews. Asked how this could be done he said it was a mere technical question.) Well, sharp technical tricks, and quick fixes will not do in our world situation. Future generations have a right to ask your generation to end this fearful threat to the very life of the planet.

There are a few other problems lying about, too, but this is not the time or the place to burden you with all of them. It is

sufficient to our time and purpose to say that you are well prepared by training, experience and outlook, to deal with complicated problems. You have a right to look forward with confidence, faith and hope.

May 4, 1982

Len Harlow
Director/PICS
University of Maine
PICS Building
Orono, Me. 04469

Dear Len:

Enclosed find a copy of my brief remarks.

Secretly, I am opposed to Commencement addresses. Your president twisted my arm.

Sincerely,

JRW/tly

enclosure

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE *at Orono*

Department of Public Information and Central Services

PICS Building
Orono, Maine 04469
Director 207/581-7336
News Coverage -7376
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Central Services -7359

April 29, 1982

James Russell Wiggins
Editor, Publisher
Ellsworth American
Ellsworth, Maine 04605

Dear Russ:

I am delighted that you will be the guest speaker at our 164th Commencement Exercises at the University of Maine at Orono. I look forward to hearing your presentation to students and parents and if there is anything I can do to assist you in any way, please feel free to call upon me.

Meanwhile, there is something you can do for me. Could you send to me a copy of your talk several days in advance of the May 15 event? If so, it would be a great help to me in preparing our coverage of the graduation and in supplying material to those news people assigned to the event. A copy received by Wednesday, May 12, would enable us to prepare and mail out our releases in time to service Saturday wire outlets and the Sunday Telegram.

Many thanks for anything you can do for me in this regard. I look forward to seeing you on the 15th.

Sincerely,

Len Harlow

Len Harlow
Director, PICS

LH:bal